

Amos 6:1a,4-7

Psalm 146

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

One of my favorite stories about C.S. Lewis is the one he tells of walking with a friend to the local pub late one afternoon after work. While they were walking, a fellow came up to him and asked him for money. Lewis reached into his pocket and pulled out all the money he had with him.....several pound notes and a handful of change.....and gave all of it to the man. The man thanked him and put the money in his own pocket and walked away. When he was gone, Lewis' friend said to him, "Now what did you want to go and do that for, Mate? He's just going to go spend it on spirits and a pint or two." Lewis just smiled and answered him, "Well, if the money had stayed in *my* pocket it would have gone for spirits and a pint or two!"

We've all had those encounters. Someone walks up to us in a public place and asks us for money. Or we're stopped in traffic at a light and there's someone walking up and down the median with a sign asking for money. I've often wondered how they happened to end up in that position. I wonder what their story is. I have multiple reactions to these occurrences.....very few of them grace-filled and charitable. I've often wondered why I get so annoyed when these folks cross my path. Why is it upsetting to me? Why do I roll up the window in my car or deliberately avoid eye contact? Why do I dig in my heels and refuse to even look at them, let alone give them anything when I know darn good and well that if it were someone that I knew, I would gladly give them whatever they asked for and think nothing of it. Why the difference? Why is it that I do not want to see the stranger in my path who is in need but I don't mind meeting the need of a friend or acquaintance?

The parable Jesus gives us this morning speaks to just this kind of situation. And it's a tough parable. For the last several weeks we've been listening to Jesus' parables in Luke. We heard about the lost sheep and the lost coin. We skipped the one about the prodigal son, but it belongs with the other two. Those are parables about the nature of God. Last week's parable about the dishonest manager and this week's story of the rich man are parables about us. There is no way to soften the message or make this parable anything other than what it is.....an indictment of indifference.

Lazarus is a poor, hungry man with sores all over his body. He's languishing at the gate outside a rich man's house. Notice that Jesus gives the poor man a name.....Lazarus, but he consistently

refers to the rich man as simply 'the rich man.' That gives us a clue about which of these two men is the more important one to the writer of Luke.

The two men die. The rich man ends up in the realm of constant torment, but Lazarus goes to be with Abraham where he is comforted and all his needs are met. The rich man calls to Abraham and asks him to send Lazarus to him to give him some relief..... a drop of water even. Interesting that the rich man calls Lazarus by name, so apparently he knew him in this life. And the rich man gives himself away when he asks Abraham to send Lazarus on a mission for the rich man. He gives away his attitude of self-absorption and his sense of entitlement. Even though he's not in a position to be bargaining with anyone about anything, he still thinks that he can have Lazarus do his bidding for him. He knows what Lazarus' plight was when they were both alive, but he did nothing to help him. In this life, the rich man was so self-absorbed that it never occurred to him that he should do something for Lazarus. Apparently, he just walked right by him every time he left the house and again when he returned.....and he didn't even see him even though he knew he was there. Lazarus and rich man were living in two different worlds even though they were physically in proximity to each other. The life that Lazarus led was nothing at all like the life that the rich man led and vice versa. The rich man had daily opportunities in this life to bridge the chasm between his world and Lazarus', but he never did. He missed a golden opportunity. Now, you see, that they are both in eternal life, that chasm can't be bridged. It could only be bridged in this life. In his desperation, the rich man begs Lazarus to go to his brothers to warn them that they need to change their way of dealing with others.....particularly those in need. Abraham says it's no use. Moses has already told them multiple times to take care of those in need. So the rich man offers one more plea.....send someone back from the dead to tell them.....to warn them.....Abraham says, "They won't believe anyone who has come back from dead either."

So what about us? Are we listening to Moses? Are we listening to Jesus? Do we really hear them or are we just as deaf as we are blind?

*PAUSE*

Now there's nothing in this parable that tells us that Jesus had a problem with people who were wealthy. Wealth is not the point. Wealth is not the problem. Plenty of Jesus' friends and followers were wealthy people. We know that because he speaks of them.....his friends Lazarus and Martha and Mary.....provided a home base for Jesus. Peter's mother-in-law also fed and housed Jesus and his followers. Nicodemus was a rich Pharisee who sought out Jesus in the dead of night to strengthen his own faith. And when Jesus was dead, Joseph of Arimathea provided a tomb fit for a king where Jesus' body was laid. Without the resources of rich friends

and followers, Jesus would not have been able to devote his life to his ministry. So it's not that Jesus has anything against people having wealth. He never says that.

This parable is not about rich people go to hell and poor people go to heaven. This parable is about Jesus' indictment of how the wealthy choose to manage those resources. It's all about the stewardship of what we have. It's all about whether or not we voluntarily extend ourselves in an effort to make things right for someone else. It's about whether or not we let our wealth get in the way of doing as Jesus asks us to do or do we use it to do the things that Jesus asks of us.

Jesus' indictment of the rich man is not that the rich man has money. The indictment is about the fact that the rich man treated Lazarus as though he were invisible. He saw him, but he didn't *see* him. He knew who he was, but he never acknowledged him. Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever walked into a room and no one seemed to notice that you were there? No one speaks to you. No one acknowledges you. No one makes eye contact with you. No one smiles at you. It's as if you are invisible. It's an assault on the psyche!! Rendering someone invisible is to dehumanize them. It's disrespectful. It denies their very existence. And that's what the rich man does to Lazarus.

The rich man knew Lazarus was there, but he simply didn't *see* him or acknowledge him in any way. Not only did he treat Lazarus as if he were invisible, he also knew what Lazarus' situation was and he did nothing.....absolutely nothing!! Not a kind word or a smile. Not an inquiry about his health. Not even the scraps from his own table. He did nothing!!! The sin he committed was the sin of turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to someone right in front of him who was suffering and needed his help.

The warning is not about being rich. Being rich is fine.....even necessary.....but to whom much is given, much will be required. The warning here is about indifference. The warning here is about rendering people invisible. The warning here is about not seeing what is right in front of us or seeing it and deciding to do nothing.

Think about all that is going on in the world right now. Think of all the situations that we know about just in this country, let alone the rest of the world, where people need for us to pay attention. Think of all the situations where people need for us to stand with them in the worst hurts of their lives. Think of all of the injustices that we see going on around us that need our time, our attention, and our voices.

We are Christians. We follow the example and teachings of Jesus Christ. We who are baptized and confirmed have taken solemn vows to persevere in resisting evil; to repent and return to the Lord when we fall into sin; to proclaim by word and example the Good News of Jesus Christ; to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves; to strive for justice and peace among all people and to respect the dignity of every human being.

As Christians, we have a solemn obligation to see what is around us, especially when it is something that we don't want to see.

As Christians, we have a solemn obligation to allow ourselves to be moved by what we see

As Christians, we have a solemn obligation to respond to what we see

As Christians, we have a solemn obligation to get involved

As Christians, we have a solemn obligation to build a bridge with others between the different worlds in which we live

As Christians, we have a solemn obligation to build community with everyone that we encounter

That's the message of this parable. There are no invisible people. There are no problems that are not ours to solve.

The paralyzing part is that when we look around, the size of the problems we see is overwhelming. We can't possibly fix everything that's broken. What difference is it going to make if I give \$5 to a stranger standing in the median with a sign? What difference is it going to make if I smile today at a complete stranger? What difference is it going to make if I ask someone their name and listen to their story? What difference is it going to make?

That's a question to which we have no answer. But when Jesus is involved, don't rule out any outcomes. We have no idea what will happen when we do these little things to acknowledge someone else. We have no idea the impact that our seemingly meaningless gesture might have on someone else. All we need to do is to remember that Jesus can multiply our efforts far beyond what we saw as possible. He can work wonders with the smallest gestures that we make in his name and with his help. After all, remember. He fed 5,000 people with just 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.